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PCSW

Permanent Commission on the Status of Women

The State's leading force for women's equality

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Testimony of
The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Before the
Appropriations Committee
March 8, 2012

Re: H.B. 5016, AA Implementing the Governor's Recommendations Concerning General Government

Senators Harp and Kane, Representatives Walker and Miner, and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) regarding the sections of H.B. 5016 that propose to merge the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO) and the Office of Protection and Advocacy (OPA) into the Department of Human Rights, Protection and Advocacy.

Merging these agencies will cause harm to the protected classes each agency is charged with assisting. These agencies exist for different reasons, perform different duties and functions, and provide a complexity of services and programs that specifically address *distinct and separate* protected classes that will not be served well by this merger.

The CHRO is the oldest civil rights and human rights law enforcement agency, and it provides legal investigation and adjudication services. CHRO's mission to eliminate discrimination and establish equal opportunity and justice for all persons within the state through advocacy and education is still needed. OPA exists to safeguard and provide a presence to intercede in situations of abuse and neglect, and when the rights of people with disabilities are at risk. OPA's passionate advocacy for its population is also still needed. To combine an agency that functions in a legal, detached realm (CHRO) with an agency that functions as a staunch advocate (OPA) places the agency's functions in conflict from the start.

Over the past 39 years the PCSW has worked closely with both agencies. With CHRO, we provide annual training and administrative support for the training of all state-employee equal employment officers and attorney gender designees on how to conduct workplace discrimination investigations. We have also served on the CHRO working group to review affirmative action regulations and hosted a meeting between MBE's, CHRO and DAS to discuss the issues and needs for disparities study. We have also worked directly with OP&A to address the health access needs of women with disabilities.

At the PCSW we know and understand firsthand that these agencies do not have enough resources to serve the populations they are mandated to assist in a timely manner. We are concerned that merging their responsibilities will dilute the work and services they need to accomplish.

The savings of approximately \$1.3M in the Governor's proposal is minor when considering how such a merger would impact on the lives of the protected classes in Connecticut. Over the past year, both agencies have tightened their belts and streamlined their services. They are a cost effective safety net and resource to Connecticut residents who cannot obtain a private attorney or consultant to help them stop the discriminatory acts against them. At a time when unemployment, the educational gap and health disparities are rising, it is not a time to bundle and take away services that legally protect individuals from being discriminated against because of their gender, race, or physical ability.

We look forward to working with you to address this issue. Thank you for your consideration.